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Cooperative Learning in an Afghan Higher Education EFL Context: Teachers' Attitudes, Opportunities, Challenges

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Abstract

This study explored the attitudes of Afghan English as a foreign language (EFL) instructors toward cooperative learning (CL) and its perceived opportunities and challenges in the context of higher education in Afghanistan. The participants (n=8) were chosen purposively from among the master trainers of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and English instructors from the English Department of Kabul Education University. The study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews, to collect data from the participants. The data were analyzed using a thematic approach and the three components of Spooncer's (1992) tripartite model of attitude as a framework. The findings indicated that the participants held a positive attitude toward CL in the context of higher education. Furthermore, the paper revealed some opportunities and challenges for both teachers and learners when implementing CL. This study also provided some possible solutions for the challenges associated with the implementation of CL.

Introduction

Cooperative learning (CL) is one of the student-centered methods that is based on group learning. It is a teaching approach where learners share information and work together in organized groups to achieve a shared goal (Tamimy et al., 2023). In CL, students are the center of the class learning everything through group activities, where the teacher is like a facilitator facilitating the learning process. This approach provides learners with specific opportunities, such as helping deep learning (Lombardi, 2019), fostering communication between teachers and students, assisting students to use their information effectively, and nourishing their overall talent development (Jian, 2019).

Considering the effectiveness of CL, many research studies have addressed this approach. However, the focus of most studies is on the use of CL in school settings and there is limited information on its application in higher education (Keramati & Gillies, 2021). This lack of knowledge also applies to the context of Afghanistan, particularly

in the EFL context. Most studies investigating CL in the EFL context in Afghanistan, particularly from the EFL instructors' perspective have focused on the implementation of CL in school settings, however, little is known about its application in the context of higher education leaving a significant gap in the literature. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the implementation of CL in the higher education EFL context. To achieve this, the primary objective of this study is to explore the attitudes of Afghan EFL instructors towards CL and its perceived opportunities and challenges in EFL classes in the context of higher education.

The findings of this study could have significant implications for curriculum developers and policymakers, as well as EFL teachers seeking to implement CL in their classrooms. By shedding light on the challenges and opportunities associated with CL, this study could inform the development of curricula and programs that incorporate this approach and provide practical solutions for EFL teachers to overcome any obstacles they may encounter when implementing CL.

Research Questions

1. What are Afghan EFL teachers' attitudes toward CL?
2. What do they perceive as opportunities for CL?
3. What do they perceive as challenges in CL?

Literature Review

Definition of CL

Cooperative learning involves students working together to accomplish shared goals (Lombardi, 2019). Cooperative learning is a teaching theory and strategy system based on a group (Wang, 2020). Cooperative learning is organizing classroom activities where students work cooperatively in small teams with individuals of different talents, abilities, and backgrounds to complete a common goal (Hijazi & Alnatour 2012).

Implementation of CL

Lombardi (2019) has highlighted three phases for implementing CL in a classroom: 1) the pre-implementation phase, 2) the implementation phase, and 3) the post-implementation phase.

Pre-implementation Phase

Some of the primary points Lombardi pointed out in the pre-implementation phase are (a) defining the learning objectives, (b) determining group size and having students to set in groups, (c) assigning each learner with specific role or task, and (d) setting accountability where each group should explain its result and each individual should defend their part.

Implementation Phase

In the implementation phase, Lombardi (2019) has remarked on some points regarding teachers' and students' roles. The students' roles include working together, listening to one another, questioning one another, keeping track of their work and progress, producing the assessment task (product), and being involved in the group. The teacher's role is to carefully monitor the groups ensuring that everyone takes part, intervenes, and assists, if necessary.

Post-implementation Phase

According to Johnson et al. (1991) (as cited in Lombardi, 2019), there are three steps in the post-implementation phase: closing and summarizing the lesson, assessing learners' learning, and reflecting on what went well and what did not so that in the future, you can fix the things that went wrong and improve the things that went right.

Cooperative Learning vs. Collaborative Learning

According to Lombardi (2019), cooperative and collaborative learning use group work and specific tasks and demand learners to share their findings and learn from one another. Despite these similarities, they differ in certain aspects. One of the differences between them refers to their origins. According to Lombardi (2019), cooperative learning has an American origin that can be traced back to John Dewey's theory of the social nature of learning, whereas collaborative learning has a British origin that is based on the results of English teachers who looked into ways to encourage their students to become more actively involved in their learning. Another difference refers to their functions. According to Oxford (1997), "Cooperative learning as compared with collaborative learning is considered more structured, more prescriptive to teachers about classroom techniques, more directive to students about how to work together in groups" (p. 443). In the same regard, Panhwar et al. (2017) pointed out that in cooperative learning, the group tasks are more close-ended, where they may have explicit answers, but in collaborative learning, the tasks are more open-ended. The next difference refers to the role of a teacher in both approaches. As stated by Panhwar et al., in cooperative learning, the teacher determines the tasks and responsibilities; however, in collaborative learning, the teacher gives the power to the students regarding their group learning.

EFL Teachers' Attitudes Toward CL

According to Haddock and Maio (2008), attitude refers to our evaluation of people, groups, and other objects in our social world (p. 113). An attitude object can be anything towards which an attitude is directed (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Haddock and Maio highlighted that attitude has three components: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. They pointed out that the affective component involves emotional reactions and feelings towards an attitude object, while the cognitive component pertains to beliefs, thoughts, and attributes associated with the object. The behavioral component reflects past actions or intentions towards the attitude object.

There are several research investigations concerning EFL teachers' attitudes toward CL. For example, Haidari (2013) conducted a study to explore the perception of EFL teacher educators and teacher-students toward CL in Afghanistan. The participants of the study were 120 teacher-students and 30 English teachers. A quantitative research design was employed to collect data from the participants. The findings revealed that the participants felt enthusiastic toward CL and believed that CL promotes students' achievements in the learning of the English language, enhances their social relationships with their classmates, and diminishes their language anxiety making them feel more comfortable when interacting with one another in group activities.

Mohammad (2016) also studied English language teachers' attitudes toward CL in North Shoa Zone Preparatory Schools. The participants of his study were 40 English language teachers from eight preparatory schools. He used a mixed research design to collect data from the participants. The findings revealed that the participants have positive feelings and beliefs about CL. The participants highlighted that when the students work with their partners, asking each other for help, they could have a high level of enthusiasm, curiosity, and involvement in CL. In addition, the teachers believed that CL learning improves their students' interdependency and accountability.

Likewise, Celik et al. (2013) conducted a study in Turkey to investigate Turkish EFL teachers' perspectives on employing CL in Turkey. A qualitative research design was employed to collect data from the participants. The findings showed that CL helped foster students' self-confidence, improving their communication, and creating anxiety-free environments, particularly for shy students. However, implementing CL with Turkish learners disclosed some challenges as well, including the standardized EFL curriculum which does not support CL, and students' attitudes toward cooperative learning. Therefore, Celik et al. suggested modifying the ELT curriculum to address the concerns preventing cooperative learning adoption.

Similarly, Ismail and Al Allaq (2019) conducted a study to find out the EFL teachers' views regarding the effectiveness of CL. The data were collected through a mixed research design. The study's findings indicated that CL improves students' engagement, social interaction in class, and cultural appreciation.

The Benefits of CL

There are numerous benefits highlighted regarding CL. Lombardi (2019) has summarized these benefits into four main categories. The first category he refers to is the social benefit such as improving learners' social interaction, verbal communication, leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict management.

The second one refers to the psychological benefit. Johnson and Johnson (1989) (as cited in Lombardi, 2019), CL enhances more positive attitudes toward learning than other teaching methodologies. Lombardi added that CL fosters a secure atmosphere since decisions are made collectively rather than individually, and erroneous conclusions and thought processes are corrected before being shared with the class.

The next benefit Lombardi (2019) highlighted regarding CL is the academic benefit. He emphasized that pupils who were taught cooperatively learned and kept information substantially more than those who were taught using other approaches. He added that the students' ongoing elaboration and explanation and group discussions strengthen and validate ideas and result in more frequent summaries and more accurate concepts than they would have otherwise; thus, the thought process becomes fully embedded in the student's memory that academically leads to a higher chance of success.

The last benefit Lombardi (2019) remarked regarding CL refers to the assessment. Lombardi pointed out that CL provides instant feedback to the students and instructors as the effectiveness of each class can be observed. For example, he said that instructors can identify misconceptions early enough to rectify them by moving around the classroom and watching each group of students interact and explain their theories. Additionally, he added that in cooperative learning, grades are not solely based on tests and individual assignments, which only allow correct or incorrect responses and offer little or no space for reflection and discussion of errors or misunderstandings; instead, teachers could use more genuine evaluations, such as peer assessment, observation, and writing reflections.

Challenges Associated with CL

Although CL is beneficial in EFL classes from different aspects, it is associated with some challenges as well. For example, Buchs et al. (2017) studied the EFL teachers' perceptions regarding the difficulties of implementing CL. They used a quantitative research design to collect data from 207 volunteers from 67 schools in the canton of Geneva. The findings indicated some challenges with implementing CL, such as embedding CL with a standardized curriculum that does not support CL, evaluating students from two aspects, academically and cooperatively, and finding the required time for implementing CL.

Also, the study by Mohammad (2016) revealed that although teachers had a positive affective and cognitive attitude toward CL, they also perceived that CL requires a high degree of time, demands a high level of control, and creates confusion in some students.

In the same regard, Keramati and Gillies (2021) conducted a study on participants from Tehran University in Iran and Queens Land University in Australia to discover the advantages and challenges of embedding CL into the curriculum in two different cultures. The result of the study revealed different challenges associated with CL. In Iran, the challenges were the tendency to use traditional approaches to teaching, insufficient understanding of how to establish teamwork, and a lack of up-to-date teaching resources; however, in Australia, the challenges were changing courses, working with external students, catering to individual differences, and building positive relationships were some of the challenges of implementing CL. As the behavioral response, they recommended that the challenges can be overcome if university instructors are prepared to address them.

Similarly, investigating the opinions of Turkish EFL teachers, Celik et al. (2013) found some particular challenges associated with CL. The challenges included classroom management, especially in large crowded classes, lack of equal participation in group activities when one or two students take most of the responsibilities, which let others participate less in the exercises, and fixed ELT curriculum where teachers are limited to teaching accordingly.

On the other hand, Geary (1999) investigated both the challenges and solutions of CL. He highlighted some particular challenges with their possible solutions. The first challenge Geary highlighted was "one individual subverts the group." That is a student may not want to work with others. In such as case, when a student prefers to work alone, Geary advises letting those students work solo but giving them the same amount of workload given to a group so that they can eventually find it wiser to work in a group with less workload. The second challenge Geary noted was that sometimes a student does everything in a group. In a case like this, he recommended assigning the workload carefully planned to each student so that one student cannot have time to do others' tasks within the time limit. In addition, sometimes a student does nothing at all in a group activity. To solve this problem, Gaery recommended teachers carefully monitor students' efforts. The next challenge Gaery mentioned is the shy students who are not culturally prepared to speak up and participate in class activities. For such a case, Gaery recommended that the teacher should help learners familiarize themselves with their peers and create a supportive and accepting environment. Another challenge Gaery pointed out is "isolation or segregation," where students prefer to make groups of cliques and exclude one who is different in terms of gender, race, and disability. In such a case, Gaery emphasized that teachers should create a positive environment and discuss commonalities to break down stereotypes. The last challenge Geary highlighted is "time-on-task". Some students may waste their time or postpone their responsibility in the group. In this case, he emphasized that the work progress of individuals should be monitored.

Theoretical Framework

According to Osanloo and Grant (2016), "The theoretical framework is one of the most important aspects of the research process" (p.12). So, finding an appropriate theoretical framework (TF) for a study plays a vital role in considering its significance in the research process. In this study, several TFs related to the research topic were reviewed to find an appropriate one. For example, since this study investigated the attitudes of EFL teachers towards CL, certain (TFs) related to attitudes, such as the tripartite model (Spooncer, 1992), ABC (affective, behavior, cognitive) model (Jain, 2019), cognitive-affective-conative model (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004) the expectancy model (Rosenberg,1956), metric space known as vector model (Calder & Lutz1972), were carefully evaluated. Then they were shared and discussed with the research advisor and as a result, Spooncer's (1992) tripartite model of attitudes was selected as a proper model for this study. As demonstrated in Figure 1, Spooncer's model of attitude has three components: 1) feelings, 2) beliefs, 3) and behavior. According to Jain (2019), the first component (feelings) evaluates an individual's feelings toward an attitude object whether they like or dislike that; the second component examines a person's beliefs and thoughts toward an attitude object; and the third component

denotes a person's action in respect to an attitude object. In the current study, the three aforementioned components are used as lenses to explore the Afghan EFL teachers' attitudes toward CL. For example, the first component (feeling) is used to assess the teachers' interests in the use of CL in their classes. The second component (belief) is used to explore the instructors' beliefs based on their experiences of implementing CL. Finally, considering the instructors' interests, and beliefs toward CL, the last component (behavior) is utilized to determine how often they use CL in their classes.
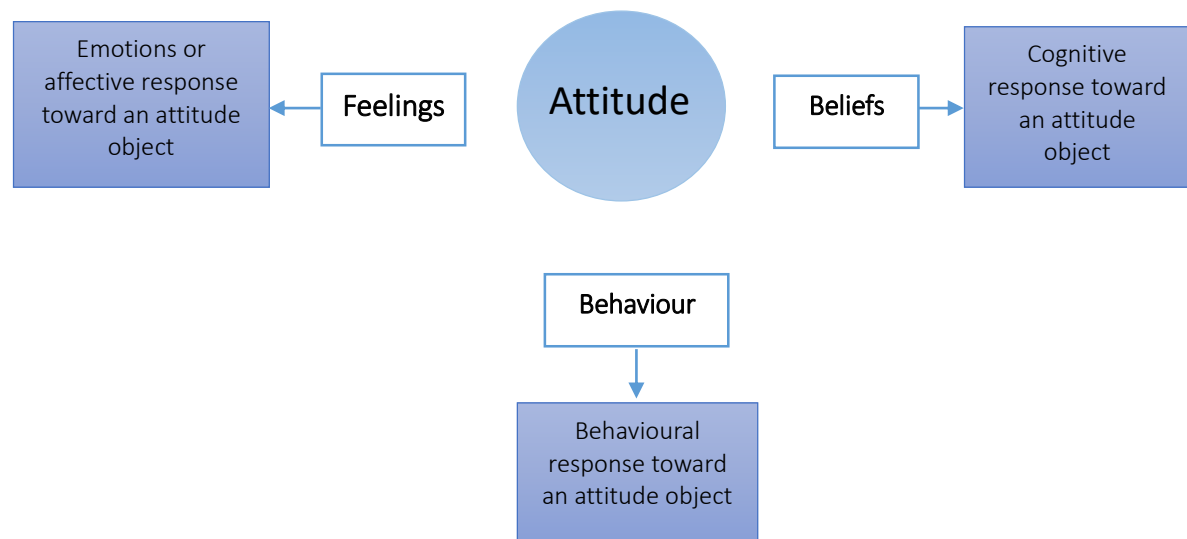

Figure 1. *Spooncer's Model of Attitude, 1992*

Research Method

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design to investigate the attitudes of Afghan EFL instructors towards cooperative learning (CL) and its opportunities and challenges in the context of higher education in Afghanistan. Qualitative research is an appropriate approach for exploring complex phenomena such as attitudes and perceptions, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013). The primary objective of this study was to gain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of EFL instructors' attitudes towards CL and its perceived opportunities and challenges in higher education in Afghanistan, from the perspective of those who had implemented it in their classes.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling techniques are used to select participants who have specific characteristics or experiences that are relevant to the research question (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell, purposive sampling is appropriate when the researcher wants to "select individuals who have information-rich cases" (p. 184). In the present study, purposive sampling was used to select EFL instructors who had experience with CL, as they were the ones who could provide valuable insights into the opportunities

and challenges of using CL in higher education in Afghanistan.

Participants

The current study included eight participants, consisting of five males and three females, who had experience implementing CL in their classes. These participants were selected from among the master trainers of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and English lecturers from the English Language and Literature Department at Kabul Education University. As shown in Table 1, for confidentiality purposes, an initial T and a number are used for each participant where the initial T stands for teacher and the number added to each initial represents the order of the interviews; for example, T1 is the first participant who is interviewed. Also, the participants' age ranged between 25 to 50.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Data

No	Participants	Gender	Educational Level	Teaching Experience	
1	T1	Male	Master's	Around	6 years
2	T2	Male	Master's	Around	9 years
3	T3	Male	Master's	Around	10 years
4	T4	Male	Ph.D.	Around	26 years
5	T5	Female	Master's	Around	16 years
6	T6	Female	Master's	Around	4 years
7	T7	Male	Master's	Around	6 years
8	T8	Female	Master's	Around	20 years

Data Collection

The data were collected from the participants using semi-structured interviews, which involved asking open-ended questions that allowed for detailed and comprehensive responses, while also providing flexibility for follow-up questions and clarification. The questions were developed based on the literature review and Spooncer's (1992) tripartite model of attitude, which formed the study's theoretical framework. To ensure relevance, the questions were piloted with two instructors. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with male teachers, while female teachers were interviewed on WhatsApp Messenger due to local government regulations prohibiting male students from visiting female teachers in person. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) (P. 79). They highlighted six steps for thematic analysis including

"familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report." So, considering the research questions in mind, the data were analyzed using the aforementioned steps. For instance, In the first stage, the transcripts were read several times to familiarize the researcher with the data. In the second step, repeated information related to the research questions was highlighted as codes. In the third step, similar codes were categorized under particular themes. Then the codes were reviewed to ensure they were placed within the proper themes. After that, the themes were finalized and ensured that they did not overlap. Finally, the findings were reported, interpreted, and discussed according to research questions, which are detailed in the following sections.

Results

The study attempted to explore the attitude of Afghan EFL teachers toward CL and its perceived opportunities and challenges in a higher education setting. After analyzing the data, the findings were divided into the three following major topics: a) Teachers' attitudes, b) Opportunities, and c) Challenges.

Teachers' Attitudes

The present study adapted Spooncer's (1992) tripartite model of attitude as a TF to look at the teachers' attitudes toward CL. Thus, when analyzing the data, the three components of the tripartite model (feelings, beliefs, and behavior) were used as lenses to analyze the attitudes of teachers toward CL. For example, the first component (feelings) was used to determine the participants' feelings toward CL. The second component (beliefs) was employed to discover their beliefs and thoughts toward it. And the last component (behavior) was utilized to explore their behavior toward this approach. As a result, the participants' attitudes including their feelings, beliefs, and behavior toward CL were explored, which are detailed as follows.

Feelings

The participants held positive feelings toward CL. The results indicated that they felt interested in employing this approach in their classrooms. For example, T1 said, " I saw very positive aspects of CL, which is why I like it." Also, T5 remarked, "… the teacher and students enjoy the classroom involvement using CL. The class environment changes from a boring one to a very interesting one." Similarly, T8 appreciated CL as it "… brings varieties in teaching." Most participants expressed positive feelings toward CL for some specific characteristics associated with it, which are detailed in the next sections.

Beliefs

Beliefs is the second component of Spooncer's (1992) tripartite model of attitude which evaluates a person's beliefs, thoughts, or cognitive responses regarding an attitude object. Looking at the participants' attitudes toward CL from the lens of beliefs, it was

found that they have a positive cognition toward CL. For example, T6 said, "I found this method a very productive and useful approach." Also, some teachers believed that the lesson gets clear and understandable for the learners through the interaction conducted between them in CL activities. In this regard, T2 said:

> There are some students, no matter how I explain the lesson or how I present the lesson, who are not well able to grasp whatever I am saying. However, if their classmates explain the lesson in their own words, they understand the lesson from each other.

Similarly, T4 remarked, "When a weak student is paired with a strong student, and they then read and discuss something, it helps very much that the weak student learns the lesson from the strong student." The teacher participants also notified some particular learning opportunities concerning the implementation of CL, which is detailed in the section (opportunities).

Behavior

Earlier, the participants' attitude toward CL was evaluated through the two components of the tripartite model of attitude, including feelings and beliefs. Behavior is the third component of the model measuring a person's action toward an attitude object. This component determines the participants' behavioral response toward CL; that is, whether they employ this approach in their classrooms or not. Analysis of the data revealed that the participants often employ this approach in their classrooms. For instance, T1 said, "I can say that 75 % of my teaching is cooperative learning-based." Similarly, T4 remarked, "I use group activities in most of my classes as it has a good outcome. I have authored five books taught in English Department, and I tried to design them in a cooperative learning style."

Similarly, T6 remarked, "I have been using CL in my classes most of the time." Likewise, T7 said, "If a task in nature does not require individual work, I prefer any task to be done through CL." However, T7 showed a different behavior stating that "... the space in some classes is not enough to arrange the chairs in group activities; therefore, sometimes I ignore using CL." T8 showed consistent behavior toward CL despite facing any challenges in implementing that. She said that there are many students in large classes, so it takes much time to arrange students in groups, and it is difficult to control the groups. As a result, in such cases, she used pair work, pairing students sitting next to each other. She managed the time, controlled the class, and utilized cooperative learning. The reason why she was consistent in using CL was to increase the learning opportunities. For instance, when learners discuss the lesson with one another, they learn the lesson better than the teacher's lecture as "... they [students] know their language better than their teacher." T8 said.

In short, analyzing the participants' attitudes through the lenses of the tripartite model, it was found that they hold positive feelings, beliefs, and behaviors towards CL. They also highlighted some particular opportunities associated with implementing this method, which is elaborated on in the following section.

Opportunities

Besides exploring the teachers' attitudes toward CL, this study also explored the perceived opportunities associated with this approach. It was found that implementing CL could facilitate and enhance the learning process in a classroom from different aspects. First, it could provide students with an anxiety-free environment where they have no stress in sharing their ideas and participating in class activities. In this regard, T2 said, "…they [students] are experiencing a situation or a condition with no stress." Likewise, T8 said, "…group setting is a natural setting; there is no teacher fear.

Second, implementing CL could improve learners' participation in classroom activities. For example, T5 stated, "…in groups, shy students can share their points they cannot communicate with the whole class." In addition, through group activities, instructors could help shy learners become active individuals and gradually remove their shyness. For instance, T8 remarked:

> *Some shy students who cannot express themselves in front of the whole class can at least for the first time express themselves in a group. Next time, they can raise their hand and answer a question. Next time, they can present a project to the whole class. Finally, they get it from the class to the society and speak up in society as the class itself is a small society.*

Through employing CL, teachers could also ensure that all learners get a chance to take part in the learning activities and share their ideas. In this regard, T2 mentioned, " Once the session is done, throughout the session, not a single student will be left without talking or without participating in an activity." Similarly, T4 said, "One good technique for giving equal participation for the whole class is cooperative learning." In brief, CL can be an effective way to promote active participation and engagement among learners, regardless of their personality or language proficiency level.

Next, the participants perceived that utilizing CL encourages positive interdependence among learners. "Positive interdependence is the belief of anyone in the group that there is value in working together and that the results of individual learning and working products would be better when they are done in collaboration" (Laal, 2013, p. 1433). For example, T2 said, "…students will not only practice something with the support of the teacher but also with the support of each other. T5 said:

> *It [CL] leads students toward positive interdependence rather than competition with each other. By positive interdependence, I mean a student will never think about their success but rather about classmates' success and group success. Students will never work individually but work cooperatively with their group members shoulder by shoulder, having a discussion and having think-pair-share activities.*

Moreover, according to the participants' experience, CL could encourage learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's learning," T1 said, "… students are almost entirely independent, and the teacher is not interfering very

much. T2 said, through CL, "Students are actually directed toward the path that they should take care of their learning."

Challenges

Although implementing CL provides several learning opportunities in the teaching and learning process, it is associated with some challenges too. One of the main challenges the participants reported about it was time consumption. They noted that a teacher needs to spend a huge amount of teaching time to implement and manage this method in the classroom. For example, T5 said:

A teacher has to waste much time dividing the class into groups, controlling and monitoring the groups, assigning tasks to each student, controlling and tracking students' performances, and watching students to see if they are really working in the groups or they are just telling their stories and wasting their times, checking the students' papers.

Another challenge the participants highlighted was class control, particularly with the large classes. They reported that in these classes, ensuring the students' active engagement in group activities is challenging because some students start doing their own business. For example, T1 said, "…in some groups, the students are busy with their telephones and do not participate in the group activities." Also, due to the huge number of students in the large classes, the teachers feel unable to manage the effective implementation of CL. For instance, T2 mentioned, "…we have like 40, 50, or 60 students in a class. So, if they are paired or grouped, the teacher is either losing the class control or feeling that he/she is losing control of the class." Overall, implementing CL requires careful planning and management to ensure its effectiveness.

A further challenge the participants noted was the curriculum. T3 remarked, "…the materials are designed lecture-based where there is no group working, formative, or summative assessment." In the same regard, T2 said, "… the textbooks are generally designed in such a way that the teacher should be standing in front of the class and just lecture." Likewise, T1 said, "The books are designed in a lectured-based way which does not support cooperative learning. It is we who made the lessons in a cooperative learning-based style." Most participants struggled with the traditional based curriculum hindering employing CL.

The next challenge the participants reported was the students' tendency towards traditional teaching method and their lack of familiarity with CL. They believed that this tendency and lack of knowledge about CL originate from school teaching methods. When students finish school and enter the higher education setting, they have no background in CL and thus prefer to be taught in a lecture-based manner. For example, T3 said, "… at school, students never worked in groups, so at university, most of them do not have any idea about group work. So, this [CL] is something new and strange for them." On the other hand, the students think that their teacher does not do his/her teaching responsibility well if he/she employs CL. For example, T7 remarked, "… the students' general perception is that the teacher should explain everything in the class, and when the teacher does a task through group activity, they think the teacher is

putting the burden on their shoulder." In the same regard, T7 said:

> *CL seems strange to some students. They think if they do the task, what is the teacher's job? They believe the teacher is putting a burden on their shoulder. They feel so because they have been taught through a lecture-based teaching system and are not used to CL.*

T2 said, "… when the lesson is presented through group activities, students think maybe their teacher does not know something, and that is why he/she is pairing or grouping them."

The reason for students' tendency toward traditional teaching methods was reported due to no experience and lack of familiarity with CL. For example, T3 said:

> *At the beginning of a class, the group activities are strange for my students because they have not worked in groups and pairs, and it is something new for them; however, after a while, they get used to it and enjoy the group activities.*

The suggestive Solutions for Challenges Associated with CL

The participants recommended some solutions for some of the challenges associated with implementing CL.

The first solution they suggested addresses class control. In some classes, controlling the groups is challenging. So, to overcome this problem, they pointed to assigning a group leader for each group to manage the group task. For instance, T7 suggested:

> *assign some students in the groups to watch out or control the other students in the group performance, and activities and writing down which students not performing well and which students in which area may need help, and what are the problems of the groups are they able to achieve.*

T2 recommended a different solution to ease controlling the groups and have them stay focused on the task. He said:

> *The teacher should choose the group's members, not the students. If the group members are allowed to choose their group members by themselves, some talkative and very friendly students group to gather and start chatting about issues not related to the lesson.*

The second recommendation addresses the weak students who stay quiet during group activities. Participants emphasized close monitoring of groups to stimulate the weak students to speak up in the groups. For example, T1 said:

> *I monitor each group, ensure each student knows what to do, and instructs them on what to do and how to participate in the group. I recommend that strong students cooperate in this regard so they do not dominate the group activity. So, they give a chance to the weak students as well.*

To motivate the quiet students to share their ideas and be active in the groups, T2 suggested: "… group them with the motivated and hardworking students".

Another recommendation addresses the lack of equal participation in group activities. Some of the students in the group stay silent, doing nothing and asking others to perform the task, which is a big problem making CL meaningless. Therefore, to have each student be active and responsible in the group activities, T4 suggested that "…each individual should be given a particular task to be actively involved in the activities and feel a sense of responsibility. For example, one should write the answers; one keeps the time, and find the answers."

A further recommendation refers to modifying the curriculum and attracting the students' tendency toward CL. The participants emphasized that teachers should establish a positive perspective toward CL among students by using exciting group activities and providing good content. Also, they noted that the curriculum should be designed to support CL. For example, "…textbooks should be made suitable for cooperative learning and only after revision of textbooks, teachers will be in a position to use cooperative learning."

Discussion

This study explored Afghan EFL teachers' attitudes toward cooperative learning (CL), and its perceived opportunities and challenges in the context of higher education in Afghanistan. The results indicated that Afghan EFL instructors hold a positive attitude toward this approach. This is in line with the findings from Celik et al. (2013), Mohammad (2016), and Haidari (2013) which have been conducted in different contexts.

Furthermore, this study revealed some particular opportunities associated with CL. One of the opportunities was providing learners with a language anxiety-free environment, where students feel comfortable and stress-free when exchanging their ideas in groups. In this regard, Haidari's (2013) findings also revealed the same results. Haidari indicated that CL diminishes learners' language anxiety and makes them feel comfortable interacting with one another in CL group activities. Thus, EFL teachers could alleviate students' language anxiety through CL.

Another opportunity discovered in this study was enhancing students' active engagement. The findings indicated that CL increases learners' active participation in classroom activities and the learning process through pair and group work. In line with this, Ismail and Al Allaq's (2019) findings also indicated that CL promotes learners' engagement.

The next opportunity revealed in this study was encouraging learner autonomy, where learners are directed to take charge of their learning and the instructor acts as a facilitator in the teaching and learning process. The point is supported by Hasyim's (2019) research article. According to Hasyim, CL raises students' level of independent learning.   In addition, CL encourages positive interdependence among the learners. The findings showed that CL encourages learners to be interdependent, working and

learning together and for each other. This is in line with what Mohammad (2016) found. His findings revealed that CL improves students' interdependence and accountability.

On the other hand, the current study also explored the challenges of implementing CL based on the participant's perceptions and experiences. Therefore, the study revealed some particular challenges associated with CL. One of the challenges was time consumption where most of the teaching time is spent on arranging the groups, giving instructions, and assigning each student a particular task.

The next challenge documented in this study was class control where an instructor makes sure that every group is on the right track and that everyone takes part in the group activities. Mohammad (2016) found the same results regarding time consumption and class control when implementing CL.

A further challenge found in this study was learners' tendency towards traditional teaching methods. This tendency comes from the school teaching context. In Afghanistan's schools, particularly in the public ones, almost the only teaching method used in the classroom is lecture-based, where the teacher is the most active individual in the class and students are passive listeners. So, when students finish school and enter the higher education setting, they have no background in CL and thus prefer to be taught in a lecture-based manner. On the other hand, some instructors, too, tend to utilize traditional methods. For example, Keramati and Gillies' (2021) findings confirmed instructors' trends toward lecture-based teaching methods.

The last challenge revealed in this study was the traditional based curriculum that does not support implementing CL. In this regard,　Buchs et al. (2017) found the same result. Buchs et al.'s study revealed that the lecture-based curriculum is one of the challenges in implementing CL, where instructors find it difficult to embed CL with the already-made curriculum that does not support CL.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore Afghan EFL teachers' attitudes toward CL and its perceived challenges and opportunities in the context of higher education in Afghanistan. The findings revealed that Afghan EFL teachers held a positive attitude toward CL. The perceived opportunities associated with implementing this approach included diminishing students' language anxiety, encouraging learners' active engagement in the learning process, enhancing positive interdependence among students, and improving learner autonomy. On the other hand, the traditional-based curriculum, the student's tendency toward traditional teaching methods, time consumption, and control of the class were the challenges for implementing CL.

Pedagogical Implication

There are a couple of pedagogical implications that could be suggested based on the findings of this study. Firstly, it is suggested that the ELT curriculum utilized in the EFL higher education context should be modified to facilitate the adoption of CL. A curriculum supporting CL not only eases the implementation of this approach but also

encourages instructors to adopt a more student-centered teaching style, where learners are actively engaged in the learning process and the instructor acts as a guide. Therefore, policymakers and the Ministry of Higher Education should consider incorporating CL features when developing or updating the ELT curriculum.

Secondly, as students' tendency toward traditional teaching methods was reported as one of the main obstacles in implementing CL, this paper recommends that EFL university instructors should introduce learners to the benefits and techniques of CL to help them get familiar with and become accustomed to this approach and reap its benefits.

In brief, Despite the challenges, CL offers several benefits for both learners and instructors. Its implementation can enhance the effectiveness of EFL teaching and learning by creating a more relaxed learning environment and encouraging learners to become independent and self-directed in their learning. Therefore, policy-makers and EFL instructors in higher education should consider the challenges and opportunities presented by CL and work towards its effective implementation in contexts such as Afghanistan.

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